

Appendix 17: Uelzen (Germany, SC2)

Organising partner:	Kulturland, ILS	Innovation Type
Practice:	Slow Succession, Slow Revolution: regenerating the agri-food system in the Catalan Western Lands through agrobiodiversity and local food cultures (Spain, ES5B)	
Practice context:	Catalan Western Lands, Lleida province - Intermediate	
Confrontation context:	Uelzen, Lower Saxony (NUTS3) - Rural	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	October 13th 2021	

Summary

The confrontation of the case study "Slow Succession, Slow Revolution: regeneration of the agri-food system in the Catalan Western Territories through agricultural biodiversity and local food cultures" (ES5B) was selected for the district of Uelzen (NUTS 3 DE93A) with the purpose of identifying concrete potential measures to complement the existing initiatives of the various networks established in the region. Although Uelzen benefits from support coming from various levels (EU, region, municipality) in financial as well as in other terms (human resources), the region experiences a situation of dormance, lacking the ability to fully economically, socially and culturally explore its potential. The confrontations enabled us to identify a certain number of reasons that are not mainly specific to the area, but rather could be generalized to represent other rural areas. The participants selected represented a set of innovative producers of organic goods, promoters of the gastronomy and cultural aspects of the region as well as representatives from the municipality.

Context

The district of Uelzen (NUTS 3 DE93A) counts as a rural region that is both strongly dependent on the agricultural sector (53.7% agricultural area, 64 inhabitants per Km²) but also enjoys relative proximity to

urban centers (Hannover, Lüneburg, Celle in 70-100km radius). As the "door to Wendland", it also enjoys a moderate supra-regional tourist activity. Nevertheless, although having the potential, the region is rather less known for touristic attractions.

The region has a very well organized and active Ökomodell Region⁴² (translated as "ecological model region"), and a Think Tank with active, engaged citizens. The eco-model region Heideregion Uelzen is oriented to current trends of increasing demand for regional, organic food and has established projects that support, on the one hand, the increase of the share of organically farmed land and, on the other hand, the increase of the supply of regional organic products to consumers. However, the distance to larger metropolitan areas is also a structural disadvantage in the marketing of organically produced agricultural products and despite all these initiatives the region is still well below the German average in terms of percentage of ecologically farmed land.⁴³ The main agricultural products are cereals (39.6%, mainly spelt), potatoes (20.9%) and sugar beet (13.5%).

As both the population and the gross value added of the region are declining (93,131 inhabitants in 2017 compared to 92,389 in 2019; gross value added in 2012: at €1,935 million and in 2018 at €1,713 million), we considered Uelzen a "less successful context" in the sense of our research project. So, although some critical success factors are present, the development of the rural region in terms of attractiveness for the studied actors (newcomers, new entrants, successors) is either absent or not strong enough. However, there are some initiatives and approaches that could be intensified or expanded in its scope, in order to achieve a stronger regional development.

This case study was initially selected for its potential to increase the region's attractiveness to farm successors, but also proved to be a tool for attracting newcomers. In the context of Uelzen, newcomers could contribute with an important share of innovation.

Results

First impressions

Although there was a general interest in the practice, the ability of it to cause a positive impact in the Uelzen area was highly questioned. The case was considered very specific to its original context and difficult to reproduce in a different cultural setting. It was considered that although initiated by Slow Food, an international, well known and strong movement, the importance of the narrative would have to be regionally reinterpreted and professionally implemented, in order to achieve an impact (DE1-SC2-04).

⁴² Ökomodell Regions are a German political construct developed to support selected geographic areas in developing ecological agricultural practices.

⁴³ According to the German Federal Statistical Office (umweltbundesamt.de) in 2020 the share of ecologically farmed land in Germany was 9.6% of total agricultural land (9.9% of the 22.100 farms), while in Uelzen district this share is 4.9%.

The confrontation method has a strong capacity to move people out of their comfort zone of thinking, and it was possible to expand participants horizons enough for them to identify two potential new development paths:

1. Regional gastronomy: the organic producers present in the workshop avowed not having thought so far about exploring the route of local gastronomy as a selling channel. They express their intention in further pursuing this idea and to develop their existing network to increase the importance of this market.
2. Vertical integration: increasing the value of products sold by adding a processing step was also identified as a potential additional revenue source. Increasing the value added of grains, such as the regionally produced grains (spelt) and potatoes (ancient sorts) with the production of pasta and “blue” potato chips. “The Lüneburger Heide Chips”, as the name sprouted during the brainstorming session (DE1-SC2-02) could become a classic, being the region one of the biggest German producers of potatoes. It was stated that there are already small producers trying their chance with small scale innovations, but they lack the support of a central, umbrella organisation to support innovation, as well as to offer the necessary resources and know-how to not only facilitate certification but also to trademark and protect the regionality of the developed new products.

Critical factors

Even if the participants were very critical regarding the potential transferability of the presented practice, they also recognized the presence in their context of a key requirement to replicating such a practice with success: the existence of regional networks. Both (a) the Ökomodell Region and its initiatives such as Öko-Regal⁴⁴ and existing producer of ancient potato species, as well as (b) the BioFood Cluster⁴⁵, which aligns organic producers with the same interests and shared marketing channels, are important platforms that would be able to support the initiative.

But having the network structure is not enough, as from an existing network something dynamic has to emerge: it is important to create a mixture of stability and connection, allowing for small conflicts to take place among members of the network, creating the necessary tension as an engine to ignite human relations (DE1-SC2-05). More concretely, the participants identified a number of elements that would be crucial for a favourable outcome:

- A. The presence of broad based platforms - such as Slow Food- which have the knowledge for implementing locally and in small scale (think global, act local);
- B. The physical capacity, such as machinery, as well as the know-how for food processing must be available in the region in order to bring about the benefits of vertical integration;
- C. Sufficient supply of organic and ancient seeds, as well as plants are necessary.

⁴⁴ Project designed to create a standardized selling space for regional products inside the local organic shops.

⁴⁵ An initiative to foster the cooperation and clustering of the existing knowledge around processing of food from organic agriculture.

Currently there is a shortage in the region of organic and even more of ancient seeds, which was seen as an opportunity to be addressed but was not further discussed.

Key issues and barriers

Following the methodology we discussed in a subsequent brainstorming which factors should be considered as obstacles, meaning that they would be crucial but hard to make available.

1. The proportion of land farmed organically is still very low in the Uelzen District. Some positive trends can be discerned but on a very small scale related to the potential of the region.
2. "Selling locally" is considered difficult, due to the relatively weaker buying power of the rural population. Paradoxically, urban consumption of regional and organic products is stronger than rural consumption.
3. Lack of selling channels that allow for specific targeting of selected consumer types, specially those that are more prone to pay for quality and for differentiated products.
4. Lack of agricultural infrastructure in terms of availability of specific machinery that would allow for more innovation, but also of bundled structures for bringing the products to the market, conceptually and physically.
5. The lack of cohesion and the high competitiveness, especially among the long-established farmers, was mentioned as a factor hindering the potentials of collaboration.
6. The lack of diversity in the offering (fresh vegetables was specifically mentioned), resulting from the long-established conventional farming and monoculture, the reduced varieties of the produced goods making it difficult to create an attractive basket for interested customers.
7. Strict regulation for animal farming (husbandry, slaughter, nitrate overload of the soil) limits the development of regional specialties and small scale production.

Proposed measures to overcome the obstacles identified

The participants were then invited to reflect on their considerations and imagine practical solutions for the stated problems. Following measures and ideas addressing previously mentioned issues could be documented:

- i. Measures to increase organic farming
 - (a) allow farmers more individual scope of action: the existing subsidy schemes are very narrow in scope and favours massification. In order to increase diversity and innovation a different approach should be put in place;
 - (b) ensure farmers economic viability: subsidy schemes to financially support farmers in the transition to new approaches of farming should be put in place, to favour innovation and risk taking;
- ii. identify the ideal conditions for a successful succession: which infrastructure is necessary, which processes should be put in place and which type of networks should be available in the region in order to favour a positive outcome within a familial transition;
- iii. The soil should be analysed for its "aptitude" and only a culture that is most adapted to the available soil and climate conditions can provide an economically viable culture. This is the advantage of

ancient local species that would normally thrive endemically with less intervention. Technological and scientific knowledge should be developed in this field.

- iv. improve availability of agricultural infrastructure with commoning and cooperation in small scale, shared logistic-services , distribution and support for direct selling of farmers goods;
- v. Slaughter management: make jobs more attractive, with better training, re-introduce slaughter trucks, mobile pasture slaughter, regional slaughterhouse.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The extensive discussion with participants with different backgrounds and opposed perspectives allowed for creativity to emerge. The idea of confronting people with topics that they are not naturally inclined to deal with or at least not interested in at a certain point in time raises a barrier that can be subsequently destroyed by curiosity and the intellectual challenge of coming up with solutions. It ends up generating a certain “aha!” effect and proves to be very creative. Participants realize that there are still many untapped potential in their own region, while creative new products are envisaged. Through the lively exchange between different stakeholders information is cascaded and processed, unveiling new opportunities for relations to be explored. In the Uelzen case we had a successor agreeing with a municipal officer to set up a round table with other successors in the region to discuss methods to approach and resolve common difficulties. The group was also able to identify 2 products with unsatisfied demand and very elastic pricing, meaning a great opportunity to diversify into this markets (eg. organic eggs and free range pig meat). Also the differences in geographic location and population structure of the different contexts being confronted were clearly raised at the beginning of the discussion as being a barrier for transferability of the practice. Later during the discussion this aspect turned to be less important and the objection faded away as more similarities than differences were identified. For instance heavy regulation appears to be one of the common barriers that severely limit innovation in agriculture no matter where in Europe.

At the end of our interaction with the participants, following paths of further interest for research crystallised:

- 1) Vicious circle: in order to sell more high quality, differentiated products, a higher buying power of the local population would be desirable. But to generate a higher buying power, more successful local employers are needed, offering job opportunities for better qualified employees, paying higher salaries and thus allowing in turn to rely on the local market for customers. Not having the local market is maybe not a cause, but the consequence of not producing higher quality goods. Political measures, subventions and aid need to be designed to break this vicious circle and allow for more local self-sufficiency and less dependency from urban centers.
- 2) Local shortsightedness: reduced innovation and creativity may be due to the fact that locals are “used” to what is available and don’t see the potential of innovation with fresh eyes, as newcomers do. An example is the local availability of innovative organic producers of smoked fish, exquisite ancient potatoes and one of the only produced white wines in north Germany, all of them not selling

to local restaurants and not promoting a bundled offering with the combination of their 3 products - that marry so well with each other and could turn into a regional delicacy.

- 3) The lack of governmental pension schemes for farmers was considered a very important negative factor impacting the decision of successors about taking over their parents' farm. This fact was also mentioned as one of the main barriers for cooperatives, since in this setting the lack of regular income after stopping the activity is not backed by support from a potential successor.
- 4) Aspects of culture clash come spontaneously to discussion, even if not specifically addressed. For instance the integration of newcomers in the existing rural life was mentioned as being a problem. The social fabric in small villages is densely knotted and newcomers have a hard time finding the adequate social context to establish first contacts. It was proposed that crash courses, the type of "how to live in the country" should be offered as an opportunity to learn the specificities of the local society - "put the hands on dirt" (DE1-SC2-03) as well as to establish first contacts with locals.

Further consequences for the context and potential next steps

Fostering the interaction and exchange of ideas among farmers, government officials and other relevant actors on a case by case manner has in itself the potential to catalyze a transformational process. The seed for setting up a network of successors, formal or informal, to exchange learnings, document mistakes and failures and work together on solutions was planted during one of our workshops. The process will be potentially facilitated by the municipality, which has a good overview of the players, as well as about the age structure of family members and could therefore facilitate the process. With the support of an engaged successor, this initiative could initialize a shift towards offering more targeted support for innovative initiatives of and for young farmers.

Contributors:

Workshop Facilitation: Titus Bahner, Ciane Danilevicz-Goulart, Hans-Albrecht Wiehler (KultLand), Johannes.Aertker, Jana Albrecht (ILS), Clara Bosco (XCN)

Reporting: Ciane Danilevicz-Goulart (KultLand), Jana Albrecht (ILS)